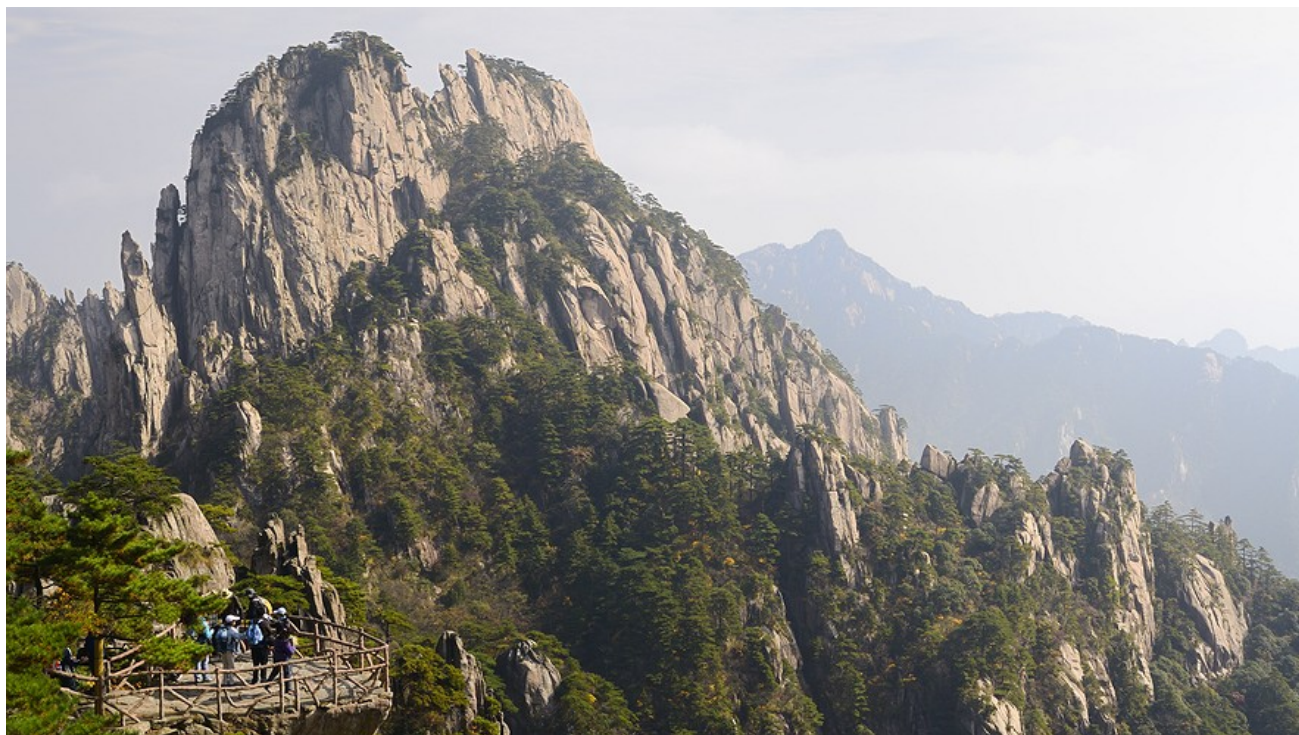


How Geography "Mapped" East Asia

Part One: China

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Word Count **1,339**



TOP: The Stalagmite Gang peaks at the East Sea area of Huangshan mountain in China. Photo by: Education Images/ UIG via Getty Images MIDDLE: Crescent Moon Lake and oasis in the middle of the desert. Photo by: Tom Thai, Flickr. BOTTOM: Hukou Waterfall in the Yellow River. Photo by: Wikimedia

The first in a two-part series

In what ways did geography allow for the establishment of villages and towns — some of which grew into cities — in various regions of East Asia? What role did climate play in enabling powerful states and civilizations to appear in some areas while other locations remained better suited for a nomadic lifestyle?

Let's begin to answer these questions with a story about floods in China.

China's two great rivers — the Yangtze and the Yellow — have flooded regularly for as long as we can measure in the historical and geological record.

Catastrophic floodwaters

Nothing can compare, though, to the catastrophic floods of August 19, 1931. The Yangtze river rose an astonishing 53 feet above its normal level in just one day. It unleashed some of the most destructive floodwaters ever seen. The floods were caused by a “perfect storm” of conditions. Monsoon rains, heavy snowmelt, and unexpected rains pounded huge areas of southern China.

All this water poured into the Yangtze. The river rose and burst its banks for hundreds of miles. The results were devastating: 24 million people were forced to relocate, and more than 140,000 people drowned. An area the size of Oklahoma was underwater, and the southern capital city of Nanjing was flooded for six weeks.

This is the power of nature. People throughout history have been forced to acknowledge it. In China, the realization has led to a widely quoted saying: “Heaven nourishes and Heaven destroys.”

Emperors tried to control the ups and downs of the environment. Yet, they had little success. These natural and uncontrollable cycles profoundly influenced the formation of Chinese and East Asian culture.

The behavior of rivers has become a symbol of the constant change of natural forces. Nature is both creator and destroyer.

Historians believe that understanding geography and climate is necessary to the study of any civilization. In this essay, we look at the physical geography of China, Korea, and Japan to see how it has influenced the cultural and political history of East Asia.

Geographical similarities

China and the United States share some geographical similarities. They are about the same size, reside in the middle latitudes of the northern hemisphere, and have long coastlines and diverse topographies.

China is located in the eastern part of Asia, alongside the Pacific Ocean. This region is also home to the Korean Peninsula and the island nation of Japan. With a total land area of more than 3 million square miles, China is the third-largest country in the world after Russia and Canada. China also has extensive seas, numerous islands, and more than 11,000 miles of coastline.

In a country the size of China, it is not surprising to find a great variety of topography, climate, and vegetation. The eastern regions are fertile plains that have been built up by China’s great river systems. This area has been settled and farmed for thousands of years. It is where all the great dynasties and their capitals were located.

In the north are extensive grasslands. They were the home of the cattle-raising nomadic peoples who interacted and clashed with China's settled populations virtually from the beginning of history. The vast "grass oceans" hosted warriors such as the Mongols. Parts of the Great Wall were built to keep them out.

The southern regions of China consist of hill country and low mountain ranges. The south receives extensive rainfall. It's ideal for growing rice. The success of rice farmers through the ages — since around 8000 B.C. — explains why China has been able to support a very large population.

China is also a mountainous country. The highest of these mountain ranges, including the Himalaya, the Karakoram, and the Tien Shan, are all located in the west. For ages, they have acted as a formidable barrier to communication. To make these barriers even more challenging, between the mountain ranges are harsh deserts like the Taklimakan and Gobi.

There is little land for agriculture in the west, so the smaller populations there have been confined to oasis settlements or have lived as nomads on the grasslands. Chinese civilization emerged in the more fertile east, north, and south.

"Wild west"

China was isolated by its own "wild west." It was cut off from the rest of Eurasia and from competing agrarian civilizations. Even today, these formidable barriers, and the vast distances necessary to cross western China, affect China's relations with its western neighbors. Yet, these barriers have their advantages, too. Chinese governments from the earliest dynasties have been forced to focus internally. Instead of trying to expand the country through conquest, China has focused on cultural and ethnic integration.

The mountains and deserts of the west limited contact between early imperial dynasties and other Afro-Eurasian civilizations for thousands of years. Eventually, the barriers were opened by traders moving along the Silk Roads. These were the first connections between China and the rest of Afro-Eurasia. It was the Silk Roads that allowed many of the ideas and technological inventions of East Asian civilization — paper, printing, gunpowder — to reach the West. The impact they had on Europe was profound.

China's two river systems have also greatly influenced its history and culture. The Huang He in the north is also known as the Yellow River. It got its name because of huge amounts of silt (yellow soil) that it carries from the plains into the ocean. The Yellow River rises in the mountains of Tibet and flows 2,920 miles to the Yellow Sea. During its journey, it crosses the high western plateau, flows through the northern deserts, and then spills out onto the alluvial plain.

About midway along its course, the river takes a series of sharp turns — the so-called “great bend” — before resuming its path. This bend was long thought of as a frontier, the very edge of the civilized world. Beyond it lay the endless and dangerous steppes. This was the realm of the “barbarians” — militarized pastoral nomads like the Xiongnu and the Mongols, China’s strongest enemies.

"China's Sorrow"

The Yellow River is also known as “China’s Sorrow” because of the misery its devastating floods have caused. The earliest cities, states, and civilizations of East Asia all appeared along it. The Xia, Shang, Zhou, Qin, Han, and Tang dynasties were all centered there. So for thousands of years, some of the largest populations in the world lived within the Yellow River system. They faced the potential of regular flood devastation. Emperors tried numerous schemes to control these floods, but had little success.

The other major river of China is the Yangtze. The Yangtze is the third longest river in the world after the Nile and the Amazon. It flows from the Tibetan Plateau nearly 4,000 miles through southern China, until it empties into the sea beside Shanghai. The river’s basin area, about one-fifth the size of China, is home to almost 500 million people. If the Yangtze valley were a country, it would be the third most populous in the world.

The Yangtze also has its great bend to the north. The Yangtze’s bend has perhaps been more important to Chinese civilization than the Yellow River’s. In southwestern China, all the mountainous valleys are arranged in a north-south direction, thanks to the collision between the Indian and Asian tectonic plates. The great rivers that flow through these Himalayan valleys all start in the Tibetan Plateau in the north. They then flow south toward the seas of Southeast Asia.

The Yangtze would have gone the same way, and millions of Chinese wouldn’t have its life-giving water, if it weren’t for Cloud Mountain. This massive wall of limestone sits right across the path of the onrushing Yangtze. The river is forced to suddenly interrupt its journey south and turn sharply back to the north.

The Chinese give credit for the placement of Cloud Mountain to legendary emperor Yu the Great, who worked mightily to keep the river in China. Geologists attribute it to plate tectonics. Either way, without Cloud Mountain, Chinese history would have been very different.

Quiz

- 1 Read these sentences from the section "Wild west."

Yet, these barriers have their advantages, too. Chinese governments from the earliest dynasties have been forced to focus internally. Instead of trying to expand the country through conquest, China has focused on cultural and ethnic integration.

Which word from the sentences helps you understand that barriers caused the people of China to become unified?

- (A) advantages
 - (B) internally
 - (C) conquest
 - (D) integration
- 2 What is the MOST LIKELY reason why the author included information about a popular Chinese saying in the section "Catastrophic floodwaters"?
- (A) to explain that the weather no longer has any serious effects on Chinese people
 - (B) to suggest that the people of China have found ways to change their geography
 - (C) to demonstrate the wisdom, knowledge and education of the Chinese people
 - (D) to emphasize the contrasting effects that the climate and geology have always had on China
- 3 Which of the following MOST caused China to have an impact on the rest of the world?
- (A) the Tien Shan
 - (B) the Silk Roads
 - (C) the Yangtze River
 - (D) the Tibetan Plateau

- 4 Read the sentences from the section "China's Sorrow."

The river's basin area, about one-fifth the size of China, is home to almost 500 million people. If the Yangtze valley were a country, it would be the third most populous in the world.

Which word from the sentences helps you understand the meaning of "basin area"?

- (A) home
- (B) valley
- (C) country
- (D) populous